

Joseph Stacy Murdock moves West

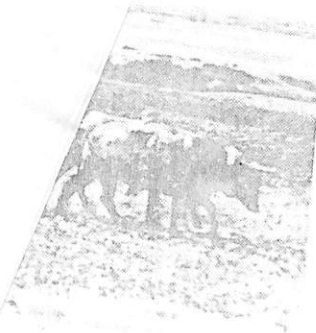
Chapter Four

Wagons West, Into The Wilderness

Heber C. Kimball led the first five wagons west on April 5th, 1847 followed by the Advance Party on April 16th, all totaling 73 wagons starting on the long trail to the Rocky Mountains. The wagon train consisted of 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children, and among Joseph's close friends in the Advance Party were Porter Rockwell, Jesse Little, Heber Kimball, and William Cayton, led by Brigham Young. Following behind the wagon train was Joseph and his family and the 8 others chosen to care for the church-owned livestock and that owned by the Mormon Battalion volunteers. Following Joseph and his stock herders were the wagons of the Daniel Spencer Company, in which group he was assigned to be 'er Captain Ira Eldredge.

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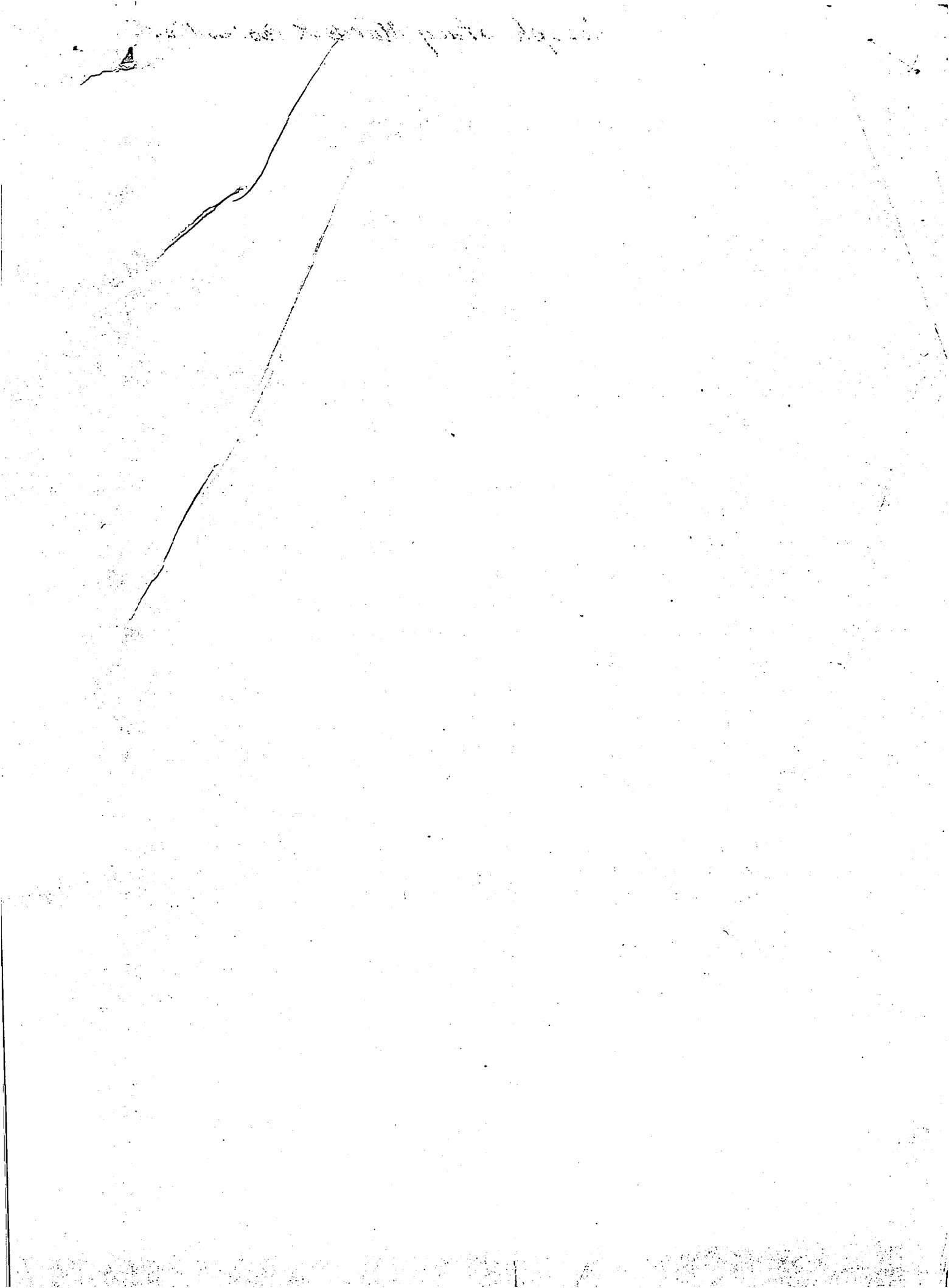
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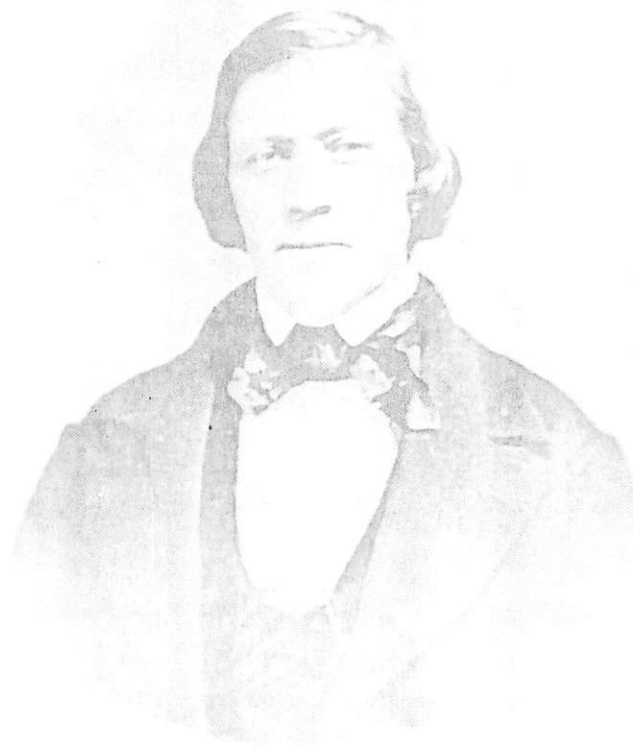
Wagons West, Into The Wilderness

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The Spencer-Eldredge Party, known as the First Emigration Party, never left Winter Quarters until July, and consisted of more than 100 wagons and 204 emigrants. Thus Joseph and his family and his stock tenders were betwixt and between, several days behind the Advance Party, but well ahead of the First Emigration Party they were assigned to. Joseph knew that he had to take care of his own, for he could expect little help from Brigham's fast moving party or from the larger and slower moving Spencer-Eldredge train which was nearly a month behind him. Because the livestock moved slowly, Joseph's little band continually fell further behind the Advance Party, but although he never entered the Valley of Zion on the same day that Brigham Young did, still he was always proud to have been among the first to cross the plains.

The Murdocks had one large covered wagon which Nymphus, then only a boy 14 years old drove. Much of the work and hardships of the trail fell upon Nymphus, for Joseph was kept busy over-seeing the more than 1,000 head of livestock entrusted to him or guarding them during thunderstorms or when Indians were about. Nymphus had to be a man when most boys his age were still in school. And there were few women in any wagon train more capable than Sally Murdock. Although nearly 70 years old, she daily hitched a horse to her small wagon, which was more like a cart, and drove it without help across a thousand miles of prairie, deserts, mountains, and flooded rivers all the way to Zion.





Brigham Young
Taken at the time he led the pioneers to the Salt
Lake Valley
Utah State Historical Society



A wagon similar to the one Nymphus Murdock brought into the
Salt Lake Valley in 1847
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Sally's little one-horse shay was a most unusual wagon. Its bench seat had been removed and she rode in a rawhide covered chair which had been tied securely in its place. The back of the wagon had been cut away to allow three sheep, a buck and two ewes to be tied so they could walk along beneath it. They were the first sheep to be brought into the Salt Lake Valley and were the start of the sheep industry in the west. She led two heifer cows tied to the back of the wagon and carried a box of flax seed which she planted at her new home to grow the first flax for linen cloth ever grown in the Great Basin.

Sally Murdock also took her spinning wheel with her, and after her arrival in Zion she would clip the wool from her sheep, wash, card, spin, and dye it and weave it into cloth for her family and to give to others who were needy. Her close friend Emmeline Wells, wife of Daniel Wells, remembered Sally's help to the needy and would later recall those pioneer days. *"When Sally Murdock arrived in the valley she had nine pairs of fine wool stockings in bright colors, and as a very special favor to her friends, she would let them wear a pair of them, to match a dress or when they were going to a dance."*¹ Sally also brought a large brass kettle and a small iron heating stove with her. That stove was used to heat the first little school house built in Utah, and both it and that old brass kettle are now on display at the Daughters of the Pioneers Museum.

Although the Advance Party was somewhere ahead of them, Joseph's party seldom saw them and traveled as though they were the only ones crossing the plains. They had the track of the wagons to follow, but each day the trail grew fainter as spring grass covered the plains and the distance between the two groups lengthened. Indian signs became more and more common, with fresh tracks seen nearly every day. Small bands of Indians could be observed watching from distant ridges, so the stock had to be guarded every night, although the riders had already spent a long 16 hour day in the saddle.

Wolves and coyote 'd circle the heard and keep the cattle restless. And

There was little wood along the way for fuel, so Sally picked up every stick along the trail, carrying it in a canvas sling tied to the side of her little wagon. Camp at night included repairing and taking care of equipment until long after dark. Mornings came early, for the cattle would begin to move at first light. There was always another muddy creek or dangerous river to cross, some shallow while others were deep and choked with treacherous quicksand. Often it took all hands to get the wagons across.

The Mormon Trail followed the north side of the Platte River because there was better grass and feed on that side. Several earlier wagon trains, including the Donnor Party of 1846 had followed the south side of the river, and had grazed off much of the best feed there. Quicksand was bad at Loup Fork and many of the cattle bogged down and had to be dragged out, a hard and time consuming process. Early on, Joseph learned the hard way that it was easier to take the wagons across first, which often required the herders to give an extra pull with ropes tied to their saddle horns. They passed the Grand Island, 50 miles in length, and found a sign post left by William Clayton, who was traveling with the Advance Party. Although its message was brief, its few words let them know they were still on the right trail and that all was well ahead. It read, "*From Winter Quarters, 295 miles, Pioneer Camp, All Well.*"²

They continued past Buffalo Creek through low, sandy hills where wagon wheels dried out and spokes loosened. Indians had set fire to the prairie for hundreds of miles, so feed was often hard to find. Frequently the cattle had nothing to eat except willows and cottonwood bark. Early in June, Joseph arrived at the Platte Post Office, only a 6" by 8" piece of board tied to a post set in the trail. The board had been split, a letter placed inside and the board's edges bound together with rawhide thongs. The letter was from Willard Richards with the Advance Party and contained instructions for Joseph and the main body of the Saints following behind. The letter was marked, "*Platte Post Office, 316 miles from Winter Quarters.*"³

According to Fremont's map they still had to travel about 130 miles before they came to Ft. Laramie. They were now entering the war country of the Sioux, so the men had to guard the livestock even more closely. At Ash Hollow the

2. Mormon Migrations & Related Events, Pg. 125, Joseph Fish, SLC, 1972.

3. Day by Day with the Utah Pioneers, Deseret News Press, 1897.

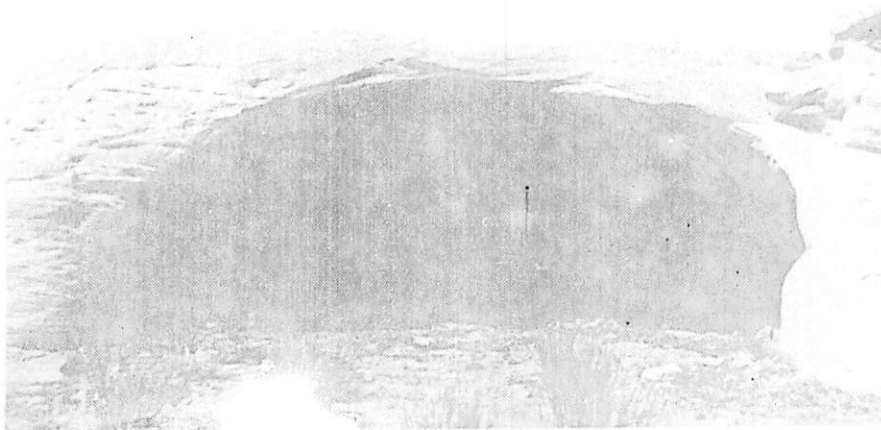
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Devil's Gate. Sally and Nymphus Murdock took their wagons over
the high cliffs above the Sweetwater River
Utah State Historical Society



took far into the night to round them up again. Joseph knew how important the livestock would be when they reached the end of the trail, so they searched until every animal was found.

West of Ft. Laramie the country grew higher in elevation so that feed became better, but the ground became rockier and hard on both livestock and wagons. A few days later they had to cross the Platte again and head into a dry, sandy country of rocks and sage brush. It was the last of July when they sighted Independence Rock, another familiar landmark of the trail. Unknown to them, Brigham Young and the Advance Party had already entered the Great Salt Lake Valley where Brigham had said, "*It is enough, This is the place!*"⁵

The Advance Party had already reached the land of Zion prophesied by Joseph Smith and visualized by Brigham Young. It was the place Brigham Young had seen in vision, "*A wonderful valley so large that all our people can be gathered into it, and yet so far from civilization that mobs can not come in the night to burn and whip and kidnap.*"⁶ But for Joseph and his little band of pioneers, the hardest part of the trail was still ahead.

In the clear prairie air it seemed to take days to pass Independence Rock where names of earlier travelers from times long gone were cut into its soft stone. They came to the Sweetwater River where the trail became slow going for the tired livestock. They came upon a forgotten and lonely gravestone in the midst of the wilderness. It bore only a name and date, "*Matilda Crowley, July 1830 - July 1846.*" Joseph could not know how the grave came to be in the middle of that desolate land, but it must have given him second thoughts about his own young wife and his aged mother, and he couldn't help but wonder if one of their graves might not be left somewhere along that lonely trail.

The Sweetwater grew wilder and more rapid, and finally narrowed to a width of only 50 feet at Devil's Gate, a cut through the mountains 300 feet deep and impassible for wagons. The river crossing was deep and dangerous and it took two days of back-breaking work to detour the wagons over a rocky ridge to bypass Devil's Gate. But their hard work was compensated by a pleasant surprise, for when they reached the Sandy River they met Brigham Young. It was late in August and Young with several others was returning to Winter Quarters to ready

5. Essentials in Church History, Pg. 370, Smith, Deseret Book, SLC, 1950.

6. The Mormon Trek West, Pg. 47, Brown, Doubleday, 1980.

another party to make the long journey the following spring. Their visit was short, for the season was late and Young was in a hurry, but he tarried awhile to give Joseph and the others guidance, telling them of the need to reach the valley before snow fell, in order to find a safe range for the livestock and prepare shelter before winter set in.

Beyond Devil's Gate there was good grass for feed, but the elevation was growing ever higher and even though it was only the first of September, ice formed in water buckets during the night. It was a happy day when they crossed the South Pass and came to Pacific Springs, where they saw the first water flowing towards the Pacific. But the trail was rough, hard on both man and stock. They crossed the Big Sandy River, 150 feet wide, and came to a fork in the trail, 300 miles west of Ft. Laramie. The main traveled Oregon Trail turned to the north, while the Mormon Trail, now only a faint track, turned southward towards the mountains. Joseph took the trail to Zion. The crossing of the Green River brought memories of his brother John back to Joseph, for like the Missouri, the Green was wide, swift, deep, and dangerous. He couldn't help but remember his brother's lonely grave in just such a wild and forgotten place. A raft had to be built to ferry the wagons across the river, while it took the hardest kind of work to get the livestock across.

Beyond the Green River the country was desert-like, and feed was scarce until the pioneers reached the north slope of the Uinta Mountains and came to the ice cold streams of Ham's Fork, Black's Fork, Smith's Fork and finally Ft. Bridger. The fort was built of two rows of cabins set 40 feet apart, made of logs stuck upright in the ground. It was a crude place and prices were too high for them to purchase any goods. Joseph recalled that shirts and trousers cost \$6.00 each, but none could afford them at that price.

When Jim Bridger told Brigham Young that grains couldn't be grown in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham had replied, "*Wait a little and we will show you!*"⁷ Although Bridger believed that crops couldn't be grown because of the near year-round frosts, Mountain Man Miles Goodyear was already growing crops at his small outpost on the Weber River near the edge of the Great Salt Lake.⁸ Joseph

7. Ibid, Pg. 130.

8. The Gathering Of Zion, Pg. 144, Wallace Stegner, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

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prairie along the Platte rose into high rocky bluffs which caused delay in getting the wagons across. By then Nymphus was an accomplished teamster, and Sally, although an old woman in years, seldom needed help to get her little wagon over even the worst part of the trail.

On July 1st Joseph spotted Chimney Rock, a long looked-for landmark. Although it was only 425 miles from Winter Quarters, it was considered to be a sort of half way marker, for it marked the end of easy prairie travel and the start of an approach to the mountains. It also proved that Fremont's map was nearly correct, but it also brought them to a hard section of trail. Sally had a hard time keeping her wagon from overturning while Nymphus had his hands full just driving his heavy wagon across miles of broken, rocky ground. But Sally's three prized sheep seemed to fare well in their strange moving pen, where they had to keep up with the wagon no matter how fast or slow it went, or how it tipped and turned.

Nymphus later kept a journal in which he wrote, "*No matter how early I awakened on the plains, I found that mother had already taken her sheep to water and was letting them graze. She kept her knitting bag handy and knitted while the sheep fed, or whenever there was a delay of any kind. Her hands were always busy.*"⁴ A pail of cream from Sally's milch cow would be hung under the wagon in the morning and by nightfall the wagon's bouncing would churn it to butter for the pan bread or biscuits she made every day.

Across the Laramie Plains the trail was deep in sand and there was little water for the stock. Alkali burned their hoofs and eyes and there was no fuel for firewood. Joseph was disappointed with Ft. Laramie, a long awaited outpost in the wilderness. Its glory days of the fur trade were long gone and it was in bad repair. Although Trader James Bordeaux was helpful and advised them of the trail ahead, he had little to sell, and what he had was at such high cost that they could not afford it.

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had noticed that there were wild onions, choke-cherries and other wild fruits growing in the mountains close by, which was encouraging to him.

From Ft. Bridger there was no river to follow. Clouds of dust hung over the herd as it moved, and cattle bellowed for water. Joseph was now following the trail of the Donnor Party of 1846, and he couldn't help but think of the terrible tragedy that befell them when half of their party froze to death in the mountains, and he urged everyone to move faster so they could cross the mountains before snow fell. They reached the head of Echo Canyon early in September where they encountered heavy brush and a narrow, muddy creek, difficult to get wagons across, and it had to be crossed every few miles. Unknown to Joseph then, one day he would be called upon to defend that canyon against the United States Army.

Just inside Echo Canyon they passed Cache Cave, a strange, large hollow rock where Mountain Men had carved their names in years long gone. The mountains seemed to close in so as to leave hardly room for a trail, forcing them to string their stock out for miles. They couldn't bunch the herd again until they left the canyon at the Weber River. The country was easier to get through once the river was reached, and they had little trouble until they came to Salt Springs, now the site of Henefer, where they turned up Bauchmin's Creek, now East Canyon Creek, to Pratt's Pass and Big Mountain. They had to cross Bauchmin's Creek 13 times in 8 miles, in a jungle of thick willows and heavy mud, through clouds of vicious mosquitoes. Sally was exhausted and only her faith that the valley and the end of the trail was near at hand kept her going.

Joseph and his herders had to push their wagons over Pratt's Pass at Big Mountain, where they got their first view of the promised valley and the Great Salt Lake glistening in the sunset beyond. It was a sight they had dreamed of for months, and each knelt to offer a prayer of thanks. Their long ordeal was nearly over, and the following day they half slid and fell down the near vertical slopes of Big Mountain low pass over Little Mountain and into Emigration

Spencer-Eldredge party which followed them arrived at the valley on September 22nd, 1847, re-uniting Joseph and his small band with the First Emigration Party.

The trail from Nauvoo had been a long one, more than 1,000 miles by wagon road and half that far again by cattle trail. Although starkly beautiful, the valley was a foreboding place, for it contained not a single green tree or shrub, and already snow had whitened the mountain peaks. At her first view of the valley, Harriot Dow Young, who arrived with Brigham Young and the Advance Party had said, "*We have come 1,500 miles to get here, but I would gladly travel another 1,000 miles rather than live in such a forsaken place as this!*"¹⁰ On January 8th, 1836 during the persecutions at Kirtland, Joseph Smith had reassured Brigham Young's brother Lorenzo Young, husband of Harriot Dow Young, while he was suffering from consumption that "*One day he would be safe from the mobs and would live to a ripe old age among the Saints in the Rocky Mountains.*" Now as the Prophet had promised, he had reached a safe haven in the heart of the Rockies, but at first glance it was far less than he had hoped for, and he later said, "*Not a green thing was in sight, and the ground was covered with millions of black crickets.*"¹¹ But Joseph, like Brigham before him, recognized the valley as the place Joseph Smith had seen in vision and had described to them. It was enough.

The strange story of Benny Norris took still another strange twist, for only a few weeks after the arrival of Joseph's pioneers and the Spencer-Eldredge Party, young Benny, only 7 years old, walked into the valley. He had wandered barefoot and alone across the plains. He had an Indian arrow in his shoulder which he would never talk about, nor would anyone ever learn in what kind of encounter he was wounded. He would only say that sometimes he would pass or be passed by other travelers, some of whom gave him things to eat. At other times he would find a few scraps of food on the prairie, or a piece of meat where some wild animal had been killed. He said that some travelers had offered him a ride but he refused, saying that he had to hurry ahead to find his sister, Mary Jane Norris, who was on the trail somewhere ahead.

After her husband John had been buried in an unmarked Indian grave at Sarpe's Point on the Mississippi, Mary Jane and her mother began walking

10. Utah Historical Quarterly, Vol. 14, Pg. 98.

11. The Gathering Of Zion, Pg. 31, Stegner, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

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westward, just two of the thousands who were lost during the great exodus from Nauvoo. Somewhere along the trail Mrs. Norris died, leaving Mary Jane alone and Benny forgotten and wandering somewhere on the endless prairie. Mary Jane somehow found passage with a wagon train heading for Zion, but Benny was not so lucky. At Salt Lake City, Joseph adopted Benny Norris and he was raised by the Murdocks, living part of the time with Sally and Nymphus and later with Joseph. There would be much more to his strange story as time passed.¹²